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LOOKING FOR (LESBIAN) LOVE: SOCIAL MEDIA SUBTEXT READINGS OF RIZZOLI AND ISLES

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Introduction

Using Fiske's (1989) *semiotic supermarket* metaphor, I examine how Twitter users mix and match moments from *Rizzoli and Isles* to create a coherent lesbian subtext. To do so, I use tweets containing the *portmanteau* hashtag #Rizzles or the related tag #Gayzzoli posted during two different episodes of the show. Live tweeting affords us an opportunity to eavesdrop on viewers' listening activities and provides data useful for testing theories about reading/viewing and participation. Here, I demonstrate the utility of analyzing live tweeting and provide examples of how live tweeters publicly read resistant subtexts.

Fiske (1987) argues that readers are able to assemble their own texts from television works by "[listening] more or less attentively to different voices" within the work (95). Though he didn't introduce the term *semiotic supermarket* until later (Fiske, 1989), Fiske does provide a semiotic framing that is useful for analyzing social media readings of television texts. For instance, he argues that viewers exploit contradictions within the texts to locate their own social identities within the text (Fiske, 1986).

I argue that we should understand the lesbian subtext reading of *Rizzoli and Isles* as precisely this kind of polysemic reading. I show how #Rizzles readers locate their own social identities within the text of the show and then use social media to share those locations with others publicly.

Background on the Show

Rizzoli and Isles is a police procedural based on mystery novels written by Tess Gerritsen and produced by TNT. The title characters are Detective Jane Rizzoli, played by Angie Harmon, and medical examiner Dr. Maura Isles, played by Sasha Alexander. The characters in both are written as straight, heterosexual women who are also close friends. The creators¹ and actors² of the novels and shows have acknowledged the

¹ <http://www.tessgerritsen.com/fanfic-and-rizzles/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUu27ig9Wgw>

lesbian subtext readings. My analysis uses the first episode from the fourth season (“We Are Family”, originally aired June 25, 2013), so please be aware that the remainder of the paper contains spoilers.

Collecting Tweets

I used TwitterGoggles (Maconi, 2013) to collect tweets containing either of the hashtags #Rizzles or #Gayzzoli. I’ve limited my analysis here to tweets posted on the date of the original U.S. broadcast of each of the episodes.

Summary of Data Collected

Data for this paper includes all tweets containing either #Gayzzoli or #Rizzles posted between 9:00 pm Eastern on June 25, 2013 and 1:00 am Eastern on June 26, 2013. This time period covers the original East Coast airing and the later West Coast airing. The episode was the season premier of the fourth season.

1624 tweets were posted by 398 accounts during that time. Accounts posted a range of 1-84 tweets and a median of 1 tweet. Of those tweets, 499 were retweets and 1125 were original tweets. 212 tweets contained mentions. Figure 1 shows the frequency of tweets per minute during the episode (i.e., the left axis represents the beginning of the episode and the right axis represents the end). This plot is approximate because it’s impossible to tell when exactly viewers started watching the show given that some viewers are using DVRs. The general trend is clear, though, more #Gayzzoli and #Rizzles tweets appear early in the episode and shortly after the mid-hour break.

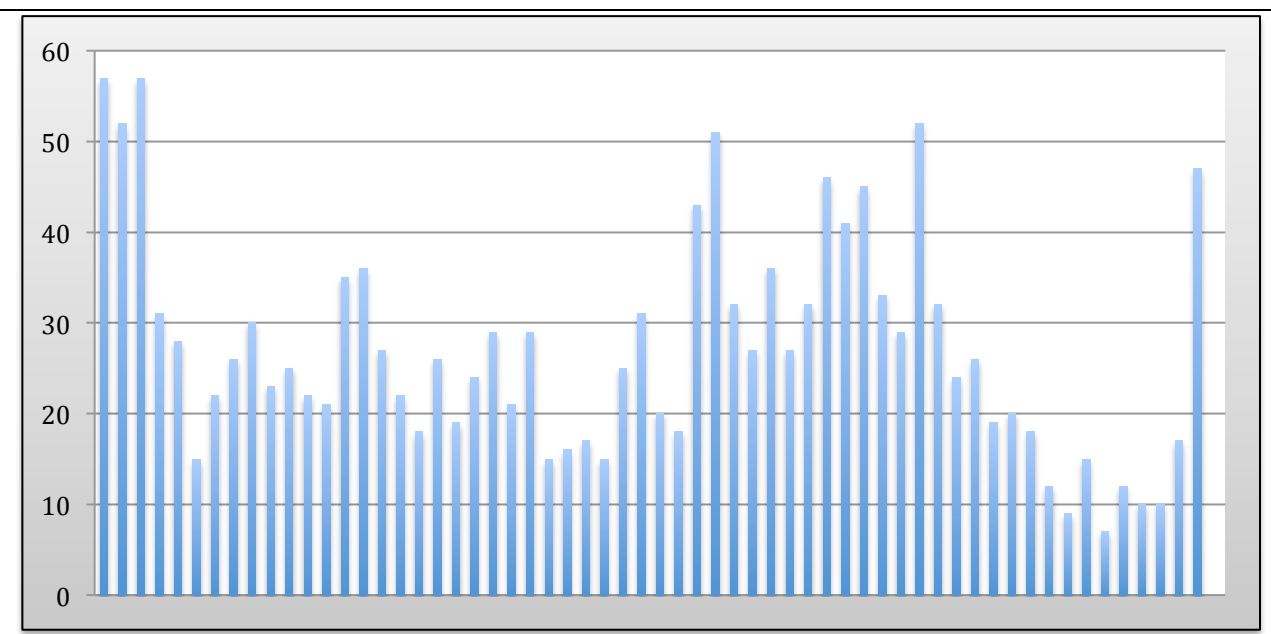


Figure 1. Tweets posted per minute. Each bar indicates one minute past the hour, and the hours themselves are discarded. The chart represents the relative frequency of tweets throughout the hour that the episode aired.

Live Tweeting and the Semiotic Supermarket

#Rizzles and #Gayzzoli viewers mark common lesbian and romantic tropes almost immediately. When we first see the characters together, they are jogging shortly after Maura's been cleared for physical activity after donating a kidney. Jane is trying to encourage Maura to keep jogging when she doesn't feel well.



Dialogue	Individual Frames
RIZZOLI: You'll feel much better when you get back in shape. Ok? C'mon.	 A close-up shot of Jane (left) in a purple athletic top, looking down at Maura (right) who is bent over, appearing to be in pain or struggling during a jog. Jane's hand is on Maura's shoulder, suggesting encouragement.
ISLES: Are you saying I'm fat and out of shape? RIZZOLI: No, I am saying that you have got to stop hoping that they are going to send you some "thank you for your kidney" fruit basket.	 A wider shot showing Jane (left) and Maura (right) jogging on a path. Maura is looking back at Jane with a questioning expression, while Jane looks slightly away, appearing to be in the middle of a conversation.

Figure 2. Jane encourages Maura to keep going.

Figure 3. Jane reacts to Maura's question.

Table 1. Transcript and images of clip 1 from "We Are Family"

Viewers responded with tweet such as

"Are you saying I'm fat and out of shape? Oh look. First lover's quarrel of season 4. #rizzoliandisles #gayzzoli" (Mirettesvertes, 2013)

"Where (*sic*) 90 seconds in and they're already like an old married couple! #rizzles" (Nate, 2013)

“Nobody does bickering married couple like Rizzoli & Isles. #gayzzoli”
(Marie, 2013)

We can already see from this first scene and these three tweets that the viewers are assembling a text in which *Rizzoli and Isles* enact love and marriage, not just friendship. None of these tweeters explicitly mention Jane’s or Maura’s gender, so they are marking their behavior not necessarily as lesbian but as romantic love. We can also see that viewers are not locating just their own social identities, but sometimes, as in Nate’s case, others’ subordinate identities. Nate describes himself as, “Just your average 35 yr old guy who enjoys Gilmore Girls, HTGAWM, Castle, NCIS & Scandal (& more) and writes fanfic. Feminist. Livetweeter. Liza Weil's #1 fan,” in his own Twitter description and compares Jane and Maura to a married couple even though he doesn’t identify as a lesbian.

Later in the episode, when tweet volume is again large, an on-again off-again boyfriend, Casey, of Jane’s appears. Many #Gayzzoli and #Rizzles tweeters are disappointed:

“OMG I just threw up again. GO AWAY CASEY!!!! #rizzoliandisles
#gayzzoli NO ONE WANTS YOU HERE.” (Danielle, 2013)

“Man I had a bad feeling and there he is...
#RizzoliandIslesSeasonPremiere #RizzoliandIsles #gayzzoli” (Venkatesh,
2013)

“Great! thanks for spoiling such a good episode with McBeardy Pants.
#Gayzzoli” (Cartinelli, 2013)

These tweets appeared in the 32nd minute of the hour, and they demonstrate a different kind of reading behavior. Rather than comment on a subtext reading, these tweets comment directly on the main text. They both reveal emotional responses and request changes in the text.

Discussion

I introduced this project by situating it as a polesemic reading in line with Fiske’s *Hart to Hart* examples (1986). *Rizzoli and Isles* differs from Fiske’s examples because the show already resists dominant readings by having two female lead characters who have a relationship independent of their relationship to other characters. For example, *Rizzoli and Isles* passes the Bechdel test³ each episode – the characters are often talking about their work (solving murders) or their own lives (struggles with their parents) without talking about men. In reading a lesbian subtext of the show, #Rizzles and

³ A popular tool for measuring gender bias in Hollywood, the “Bechdel test” is named for a comic strip by Alison Bechdel (1988). Her strip’s characters claim a movie passes if it (1) has at least two named women who (2) have a conversation with each other that (3) is not about a man. A recent Five Thirty Eight analysis found that only half of movies pass the test (Hickey, 2014), demonstrating that media “passing the test” is not the norm.

#Gayzzoli tweeters are not just resisting the text but arguing that the text itself should have done resistance *differently*. Live lesbian subtext tweeters are reading not just female friendship (a resistance to dominant media) but lesbian love (a different resistance). They openly reject characters in the canonical text who interfere with subtexts. They describe emotional responses to conflict between the canonical text and the subtext. #Gayzzoli tweeters are certainly not the first fans to read same-sex romance into a same-sex friendship (see, e.g., Stasi, 2006; Dhaenens, 2012; Dhaenens, Bauwel, & Biltreyst, 2008). What's unique here is that we can witness the reading in (near) real-time, and it occurs without requiring the generation of new texts such as fan fiction.

The twin paucities of straight female friendships and loving lesbian relationships involving series lead(s) depicted in television and film in the U.S. makes *Rizzoli and Isles* an easy target for subtext readers. The show is susceptible to lesbian subtext readings precisely because straight female friendships are too rare in TV for one to seem like an acceptable canonization.

Conclusion

The live tweets viewers post allow us to watch their readings of television episodes unfold. This data, especially when coupled with the episode text, allows us to test our theories of audience and participation. I demonstrated this approach and provided evidence of resistant readings that publicly mark polysemic moments in the text. These moments in *Rizzoli and Isles* are especially interesting because the multiple meanings are marked by viewers who don't share a singular social identity.

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